

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20510

August 3, 2020

Michael Carvajal
Director
Bureau of Prisons
320 1st St NW
Washington, DC 20534

Michael Rigas
Acting Director
U.S. Office of Personnel Management
1900 E Street, NW,
Washington, DC 20415

Dear Director Carvajal and Acting Director Rigas:

We write to support the efforts of the correctional staff at the United States Penitentiary (USP) Thomson to recruit qualified staff to work at the facility. Specifically, we support their request that USP Thomson be included in the Chicago-Naperville, IL-IN-WI GS Locality, which would increase compensation for Thomson employees and help with recruitment. Additionally, we support their request that Thomson correctional officers be provided a 25 percent retention bonus.

As you know, USP Thomson is a high security federal penitentiary with an adjacent minimum-security satellite camp. To manage this population, AUSP Thomson is authorized to employ 611 staff, including 365 custody staff. However, as of June 25, 2020, the prison only has 411 hired employees, including 203 custody staff.

This high number of unstaffed positions has led to many issues at USP Thomson, including significant overtime, use of augmentation, and unstaffed positions. On June 15, 2020, Warden Chris Rivers wrote Thomson employees stating: “Since receiving our first [Special Management Unit] inmates January 23, 2019, the management of our volatile inmate population has been non-stop... many of you have spent 50, 60, and sometimes 70+ hours a week making this happen. In just a short time, you have handled more correctional services issues than most correctional staff across the Bureau deal with in a 20+ year career.”

In the same message, Warden Rivers noted several positions that will not be staffed effective June 16, 2020. Among these positions are Compound Three positions, which monitor inmate recreation and respond to arising situations; Search Team 1-5 AM/PM, who search for weapons and respond to emergencies; and the prisons perimeter patrol team, which is charged with perimeter security.

These inadequate staffing levels, long hours, and unfilled positions led AFGE Local 4070 to write our offices on June 15, 2020, noting: “USP Thomson has a problem with staffing levels,

which are not only a danger to the staff, community and inmate population, but create obstacles for completing the tasks required...more staff are needed across the board, [with a particular focus] on staff within programs and custody.”

As you know, there are several factors that hamper the ability of USP Thomson to fill vacant positions. These include limited housing options, long commutes to the facility, and lack of childcare services. In fact, on May 24, 2019, former USP Thomson Warden Donald Hudson wrote a letter to local communities highlighting the need for additional amenities to bolster recruitment efforts. The letter notes:

Affordable and desirable housing along with good quality schools and day care centers determine where Bureau of Prisons’ staff reside. They need apartments, rental houses, starter homes, and larger homes for their expanding families. Unfortunately, for some, commuting a long distance is necessary, with some staff traveling as far north as Dubuque and south beyond the Quad Cities.

The letter also outlines USP Thomson’s efforts to recruit employees:

Thomson is now offering new Correctional Officers a sign-on bonus of 10% of their salary and after successfully completing one year of service...However, this may not be enough to entice staff to reside in the local community....

Given the low staffing levels, unstaffed positions, and issues with recruitment we strongly support AFGC Local 4070’s request that Thomson staff be provided a 25 percent retention bonus and Chicago-based compensation. There is precedent for providing these bonuses. BOP is currently offering a 25 percent recruitment incentive for individuals who have received firm offers of employment as correctional officers at MDC Brooklyn and MCC New York.

In addition, adding Thomson Prison to the Chicago-Naperville, IL-IN-WI GS Locality will greatly help with recruitment. As you know, the 2020 Locality Pay Adjustment for the Chicago locality is 28.59 percent, which means that GS employees in this area are paid 28.59 percent more than the GS Base Pay Table. Currently, employees at USP Thomson are only receiving a 15.95 percent pay adjustment.

Given the significant differences in pay between USP Thomson and federal prisons in Chicago, it is difficult for the facility in Thomson to maintain their already limited staffing levels, as employees can make significantly more at RRM Chicago and MCC Chicago. These issues are only compounded by the lack of amenities in the Thomson area discussed above. Indeed, USP Thomson staff have told our offices that they cannot compete with the pay being offered by BOP facilities in Chicago, which are a little over two hours away.

It is thus necessary to take additional steps to encourage recruitment and retention of staff at USP Thomson. The local union’s requests for a 25 percent retention bonus and Chicago locality pay

would provide immediate encouragement for qualified individuals to apply to work at USP Thomson, as well as for current staff to remain at the facility. We strongly support these requests and urge you to use these and any other tools necessary to quickly address the ongoing staffing shortages at USP Thomson.

Sincerely,

/s/ Cheri Bustos

Cheri Bustos
Member of Congress

/s/ Dick Durbin

Richard J. Durbin
United States Senator

/s/ Dave Loebsack

Dave Loebsack
Member of Congress

/s/ Tammy Duckworth

Tammy Duckworth
United States Senator